Adult Literacy In Northern Alberta

Position Paper

Alberta

NORTHERN ALBERTA
DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Adult Literacy in Northern Alberta

Position Paper

Northern Alberta
Development Council
July 1989

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DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

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July, 1989

The Northern Alberta Development Council is pleased to present this position paper on adult literacy issues as they affect northern Alberta.

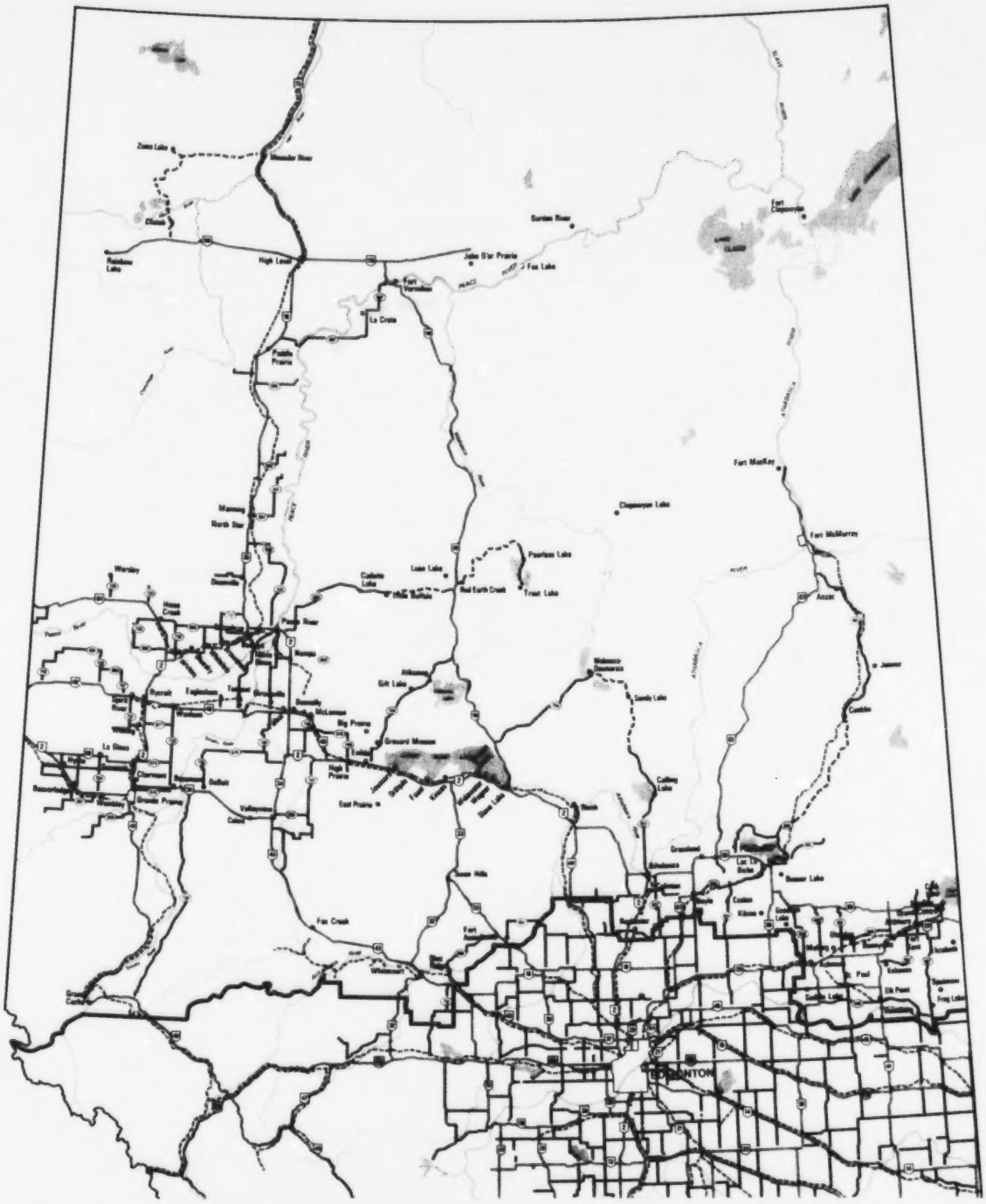
Council is well aware of the importance of education to the development of the north and over the years has engaged in a number of activities relating to education issues. When Council received numerous briefs expressing serious concerns that many adults in the north possess inadequate reading and writing skills, it was determined that an examination of the situation should be undertaken.

In developing this document, Council prepared a background report based on a detailed examination of the existing literacy situation. Council also sponsored two public workshops for the purpose of receiving further input from northerners.

The research indicates that there is much activity in the literacy area, although it is clear there is still much to do. Council commends the dedication and commitment of those individuals who have given so much of their time and energy to addressing illiteracy in the north and hope that these recommendations will have a positive impact on their efforts.

Bob Elliott

Bob Elliott, MLA
Chairman



NORTHERN ALBERTA DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL AREA

COMMUNITIES WITH POPULATION OVER 75 (1991 CANADA CENSUS)

PRIMARY HIGHWAY — SECONDARY ROAD ------ L.O.C. ROAD -------- RAILWAY

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Introduction

The Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) was established as an advisory body to the Minister Responsible for Northern Development to help in the investigation, planning, promotion and coordination of measures to foster economic and social development in northern Alberta. The Council is dedicated to increasing the dialogue and flow of information between the provincial government and the citizens of northern Alberta.

Since 1973, the Council has held more than 90 public meetings, sponsored a number of conferences and seminars, and received over 2000 briefs from northerners. The Council has undertaken over 120 major research studies and program reviews and prepared numerous submissions to the Provincial Cabinet.

Education is important to northerners. Over the past years, numerous briefs have been presented concerning primary, secondary and adult education issues. As a result of these many briefs, Council has undertaken a number of research projects into northern issues related to education.

Adult Education and Training in Northern Alberta

The *Adult Education and Training in Northern Alberta* study in 1982 sought the views of representatives from northern Alberta communities, educational institutions, industry and government. The goal of the study and resulting workshop was to review and reach a consensus on priorities and recommendations regarding adult education and training issues.

Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta

In 1984, Council undertook a major review of the problem of early school leavers in northern Alberta, with a view to proposing practical recommendations to reduce the number of school dropouts. A technical report and three major review workshops resulted in key recommendations presented to school boards, government departments, and appropriate agencies in a position paper entitled *Early School Leavers in Northern Alberta: Workshop Report.* Council is presently preparing a videotape highlighting six communities that are carrying out innovative programming to address the early school leaver problem at the local level. The video will be available in September 1989.

Adult Literacy in Northern Alberta

In the last few years, the NADC has received numerous briefs on the topic of illiteracy. To become more familiar with the issues, Council requested that a study be undertaken to review the current state of literacy in the north. In 1988, a steering committee was struck to provide direction to the study process. The following individuals were appointed to the committee:

Barb Heise — AVC Lesser Slave Lake, Slave Lake
Kim Kopola-Ghostkeeper — NADC Council Member, Paddle Prairie
Jean McIntyre — Keyano College, Fort Chipewyan
Ann Vos — Fairview College's Northern Region Adult Literacy Program, Keg River
Harold Wynne — North Peace Adult Education Consortium, Peace River
John Fisher — Alberta Advanced Education, Edmonton
Arlene Reid — Northern Development Branch, Peace River

The three-phase research process included a number of activities.

Phase I

HLA Consultants was contracted to conduct an in-depth look at illiteracy in the north. Six northern communities were selected for study, as well as nine post-secondary institutions. Information from these sources was analyzed and integrated with conceptual literature and statistical reports. Over 200 interviews were conducted.

Phase II

Bonnie Hutchinson Enterprises Inc. conducted a thorough review of the 1986 census data from Statistics Canada to describe the characteristics of the northern population, particularly those with less than Grade 9 education. As well, a survey was conducted of all of the literacy projects and services offered in northern Alberta. This included Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes, volunteer tutor projects (VTPs) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Information was gathered on the personnel, students and funding of each project. This information resulted in a statistical overview of northern literacy.

Phase III

The results and highlights of both of these documents are contained in the NADC-produced *Adult Literacy in Northern Alberta: A Background Report.*

Two public workshops were held in May 1989 in Lac La Biche and Fairview. Over 75 literacy coordinators, instructors and tutors, and government and agency representatives met to discuss concerns, brainstorm ideas and identify strategies to address northern literacy issues.

Based on the research and the workshops, the Northern Alberta Development Council produced this position paper.

The Background Report

The Northern Alberta Development Council's *Adult Literacy in Northern Alberta: A Background Report* summarizes the highlights and results of two studies commissioned by the NADC. The report has four objectives, the findings of which are detailed in the background report:

- To conduct a thorough review on literacy issues and trends
- To provide an overview of literacy and the present situation in northern Alberta
- To identify the characteristics of the illiterate adult in northern Alberta
- To complete a thorough review of all programs and practices addressing literacy in northern Alberta

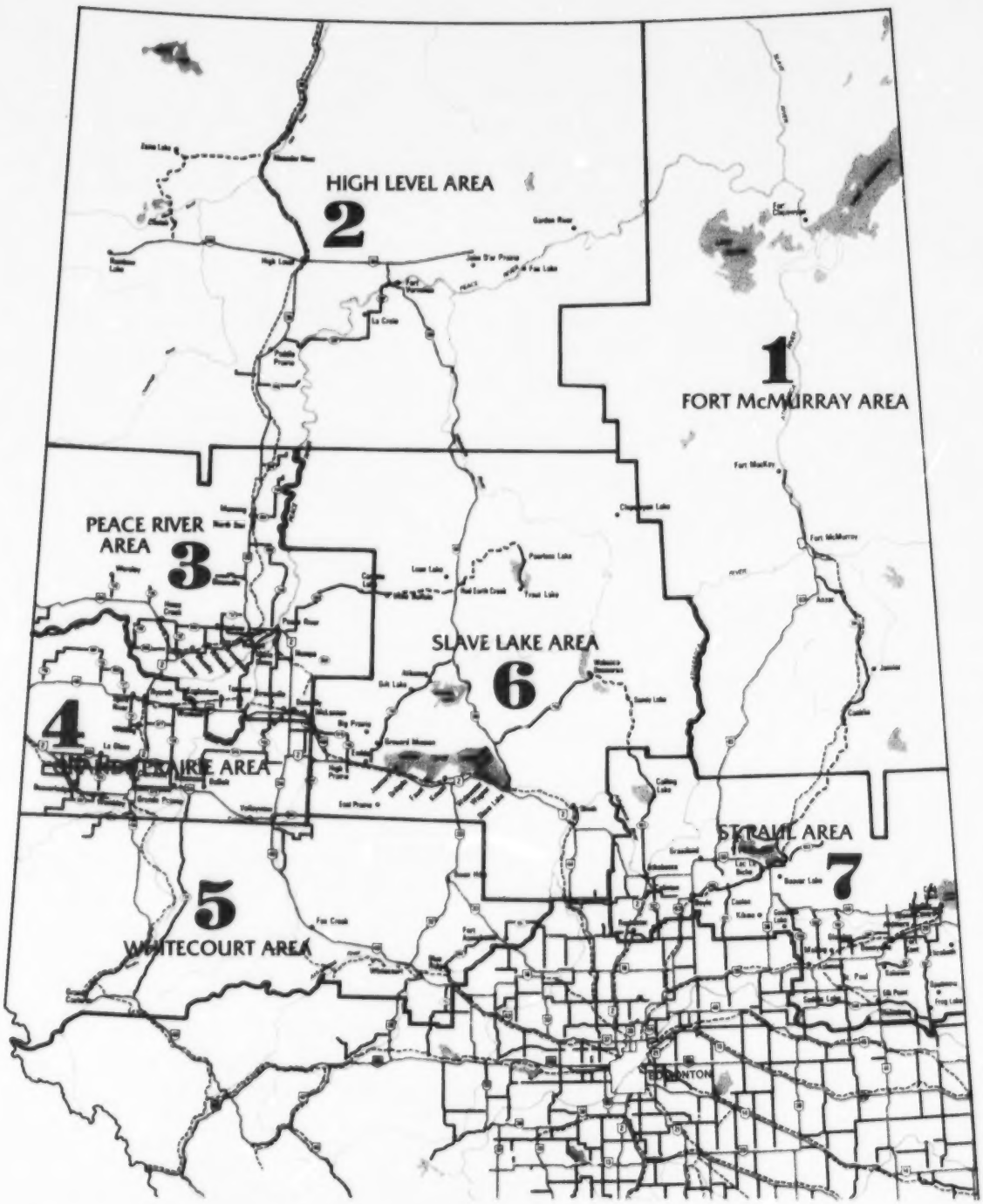
Overview of Literacy Issues

The issues surrounding illiteracy are many and range from defining illiteracy, to measuring illiteracy, to approaching illiteracy.

The definition of illiteracy is mired in controversy. Two general types of definitions dominate the scene: absolute definitions and relative definitions. An absolute definition relies on a level of education to identify illiteracy (e.g., less than Grade 9) whereas relative definitions define illiteracy in relation to the skills an individual needs to achieve goals. The second definition suggests that literacy skills considered adequate at one stage in life are not necessarily sufficient at another time.

The definition selected has an impact on measuring the number of people who are illiterate. In Canada, according to the absolute definition that suggests an individual is illiterate if he or she has less than Grade 9 education, there are 4 million people who are illiterate. A relative definition was selected by the Southam study which determined illiterate individuals based on skill level. By this definition, 4.5 million Canadians were identified as illiterate. Although the total numbers of people do not differ significantly, Southam identified 1.7 million Canadians with less than Grade 9 who were *literate* and 2.4 million with Grade 9 or more who proved to be *illiterate*.

Although both definitions have strengths and weaknesses, they can each serve different purposes. The absolute definition is useful for identifying, describing and analyzing the illiterate *population*; whereas the relative definition is useful when dealing with and understanding the *individual*.



NORTHERN ALBERTA DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL AREA

COMMUNITIES WITH POPULATION OVER 75 (1981 CANADA CENSUS)

PRIMARY HIGHWAY — SECONDARY ROAD — L.O.C. ROAD — RAILWAY

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Regional Boundaries for Adult Literacy in Northern Alberta

Literacy in Northern Alberta

In an effort to get a picture of the current literacy situation in northern Alberta, the Northern Alberta Development Council research gathered data from a number of sources:

- Interviews — Interviews were conducted with over 200 respondents, representing literacy tutors, instructors and students, community persons and program administrators and coordinators. Both federal and provincial government departments were also contacted to obtain information on literacy programs, including funding information, types of programs, numbers of students served, dollars spent and the overall demand for literacy services.
- Survey — A telephone survey of literacy projects in northern Alberta was conducted to determine the characteristics of present learners, the types of services available and the demands placed on those services. A total of 46 projects involving 77 learning centres and communities were contacted.
- Canada Census Data — Data from the 1986 Canada Census were compiled and analyzed to identify the "statistically illiterate" population of northern Alberta and to target potential learners. Information on the north, seven regions created within the north, and Alberta as a whole was compiled and compared. The regions were selected to identify any regional variations within the north and were based on a number of factors, such as trading areas, population movement, institutional and further education council boundaries and Census Canada divisions. The seven regions are listed below and identified on the map in Table 1:

Region 1: Fort McMurray — includes Fort Chipewyan and area

Region 2: High Level — includes Fort Vermilion and area

Region 3: Peace River — includes Fairview and area

Region 4: Grande Prairie — includes Valleyview and area

Region 5: Whitecourt — includes Grande Cache, Swan Hills, Fox Creek and areas

Region 6: Slave Lake — includes High Prairie, Grouard, East Prairie and areas

Region 7: St. Paul — includes Athabasca, Lac La Biche, Cold Lake and areas

The Grade 9 indicator was used to identify the "statistically illiterate" population; limitations to the Grade 9 definition are recognized.

"Statistically Illiterate" Population

The 1986 Canada Census Data provided some interesting statistics on those individuals with less than Grade 9 education.

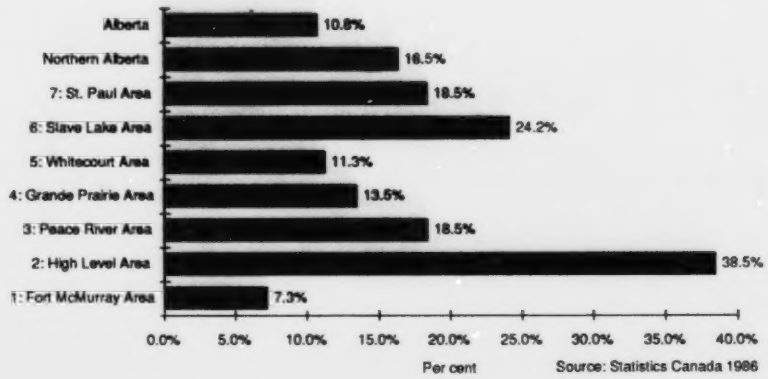
- Over 27,000 or 16.5% of northern Albertans over 15 years of age have less than Grade 9. The Alberta percentage is 10.8%. (See Table 2 and Graph 1.)
- There is much regional variation in the less than Grade 9 population. For example, in the High Level area 38.5% of the population has less than Grade 9. This is 3.5 times the provincial average of 10.8%. On the other extreme, Fort McMurray area's rate is 7.3%.
- Men make up 57% of those with less than Grade 9.
- 65% with less than Grade 9 are 45 years or older.
- Of those aged 15 to 24, 9% have less than Grade 9. In Alberta, the percentage is 4%.

Table 2
Northern Population and "Statistically Illiterate" by Region

Region	Working Age (15+) Population	"Statistically Illiterate" Population	Per cent "Statistically Illiterate"
1: Fort McMurray area	26,030	1,915	7.30%
2: High Level area	8,720	3,360	38.50%
3: Peace River area	23,435	4,340	18.50%
4: Grande Prairie area	41,420	5,595	13.50%
5: Whitecourt area	12,115	1,375	11.30%
6: Slave Lake area	13,540	3,290	24.20%
7: St. Paul area	42,425	7,840	18.50%
Northern Alberta	167,685	27,715	16.50%
Alberta	1,776,070	192,280	10.80%

Source: Statistics Canada 1986

Graph 1
Per cent of "Statistically Illiterate" by Region

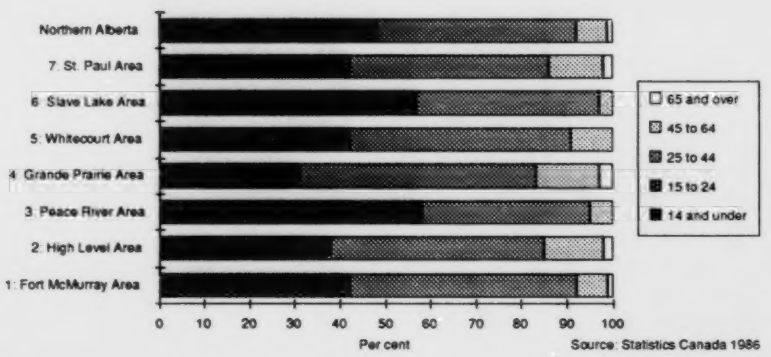


Literacy Learners

The characteristics of learners enrolled in literacy programs were examined. The telephone survey of all 46 literacy projects revealed:

- Literacy learners tend to be young — 47% are under 25 years in 1988; 97% are under 44 years. (See Graph 2.)
- Most learners are women (56%).
- 44% of the literacy learners speak an aboriginal language as their first language.
- 56% of literacy learners are unemployed.
- 38% of the literacy learners have an education level of Grade 9 or higher.

Graph 2
Age of Learners by Region (%)



Literacy Services

Northern Alberta has 46 literacy-related projects, which include 24 adult basic education projects, 16 volunteer tutor projects and 6 English as a Second Language classes. The 1988 enrolment for literacy courses was 2,361 students. (See Graph 3.) There has been significant growth in both the number of literacy projects and the enrolment levels of literacy learners since 1981. Much development has taken place, especially for the volunteer tutor projects, since the majority did not get started until the mid-1980s or later. (See Graph 4.)

When compared to the 27,000 people with less than Grade 9 education, about 8.4% of those people "statistically illiterate" are in some type of literacy program. The provincial average is 9.4%. The wide variation in rates among the regions suggests that varying numbers of literacy programs are also required by regions.

Five government departments fund literacy projects in northern Alberta. They include:

- Alberta Advanced Education
- Alberta Career Development and Employment
- Employment and Immigration Canada
- Department of Indian and Northern Affairs
- Canada/Alberta Northern Development Subsidiary Agreement

Secretary of State (Canada) also funds literacy-related projects.

Northern Literacy Issues

By any standard, illiteracy is an area of concern that affects many Canadians. In northern Alberta, the statistically illiterate population is significant both in number and scope. The northern illiteracy rate of 16.5% is over half again the provincial rate of 10.8% Only one of the seven regions has an illiteracy rate less than the provincial norm (Fort McMurray area — 7.3%).

Program-wise, Alberta has a reputation that can be envied. Provincial programs are considered the best in the country. One strength is that literacy projects are not concentrated in large urban centres but are widely distributed in many northern communities. Alberta's north has over 46 projects providing literacy services to northerners, which in 1988 numbered 2,361 learners. Many of the projects are learner-centred and community-based which allows them flexibility and adaptability.

While there is much activity, there are many successes of which to be proud. However, there are still some areas of concern. The following issues have been identified in the research and through consultation and need to be addressed if northern Alberta is to deal adequately with illiteracy.

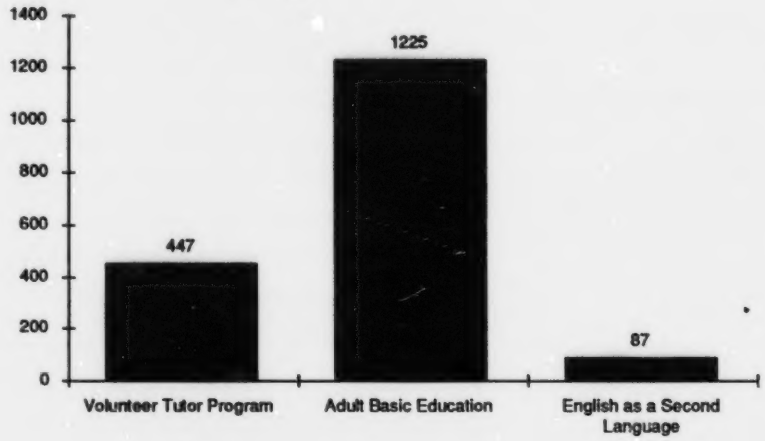
Literacy Awareness

There is a general lack of awareness by the public about illiteracy, the problem and the consequences. There is still a stigma attached to being illiterate which may prevent those people who need literacy services from coming forward.

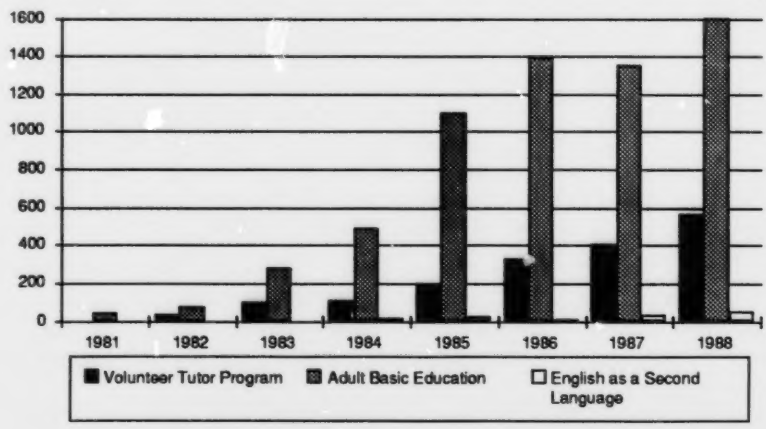
Targeting Literacy Learners

Profiles of the typical literacy learner and the "statistically illiterate" person are very different. There is a large population not receiving services who may require them.

Graph 3
Enrolment by Program (as of February 1989)



Graph 4
Program Enrolment Growth by Type



Learner Support

Survey results showed much concern over the lack of student supports. In addition to student financing, other areas such as daycare and housing were noted.

Volunteer Tutor Project Support

Volunteer tutor projects provide flexible, adaptable and community-based programming. However, they are under-funded and much of the coordinator time is spent on fund raising and administration, rather than tutor-learner support. Their financial needs are not being met.

Program Funding

Funding overall for literacy programs tends to be unstable due to the *ad hoc* nature of the funding. Many programs have wait lists and some would like to expand to unserviced or underserviced communities but lack the financial resources.

Prevention

Both StatsCan data and the survey results show high numbers of youth (under 24 years) lacking in the most basic of literacy skills. Steps need to be taken to slow the rate of illiteracy, especially among the youth.

Illiteracy and Native People

Indians on reserves appear to be caught in a jurisdictional vacuum which affects the provision of literacy programs. There are some native communities with no literacy services and other communities which are unable to get funding for their initiatives. The indications are that illiteracy rates among natives are significantly higher than non-natives which makes this a particularly serious problem.

Innovative Approaches

There is a need for more innovative approaches to literacy training that will appeal to the needs of the illiterate adult.

Guiding Principles

Although the literacy issue is diverse and complex, there are some key ideas that have surfaced time and again in the research and through the numerous consultations. They represent basic beliefs upon which ongoing activities and new initiatives should be based. The NADC believes that these ideas could serve as "guiding principles" in new developments that meet the growing demands in literacy.

- Adult literacy programs must be **flexible** in their timing and in their approach. Literacy providers need to recognize that adult students have obstacles to overcome and unique needs that must be addressed in order to have effective participation and learning. Literacy learners have diverse needs and programs must be learner-centred.
- Adult literacy programs need to be **holistic**. This means recognizing the student's needs in all aspects of his or her life and linking the learner to the community in a meaningful way.
- There must be **accountability** in every aspect of the literacy scene and by each player. Learners need to take responsibility for their own education and be committed to their actions. Literacy providers need to ensure that they are achieving results and making effective use of government dollars. Government funding agencies must have a rational plan for meeting literacy needs and ensure needs are being met in an equitable and cost-effective manner.
- Literacy activities must be **coordinated** both at the community level and by government. It is important for community agencies and groups to work together and be aware of the different literacy programs to ensure effective referrals take place and to integrate literacy into the planning of the whole educational community. The gaps must be narrowed between the public school system, volunteer projects and institutional programs. Likewise, it is imperative that coordination of planning and funding occurs at the departmental and interdepartmental level. While there are commendable examples of interdepartmental coordination at the provincial level, such as among Advanced Education, Alberta Education and Career Development and Employment, it is critical to also involve federal government departments who have a role to play in addressing literacy needs. Employment and Immigration Canada, Secretary of State, and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs are but three federal departments whose mandates include literacy activities.

Northern Alberta Development Council Recommendations

Based on the findings of the background report, two public workshops and extensive consultation, the Northern Alberta Development Council makes the following recommendations.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Recommendation 1

That senior governments fund a coordinated multimedia campaign to increase the awareness of illiteracy during the United Nations Year of Literacy in 1990.

There is limited awareness by the general public about the immensity and consequences of the illiteracy problem. An awareness campaign would serve several purposes. Firstly, it would help to alleviate the stigma attached to illiteracy and make it acceptable for people to admit they are illiterate. Secondly, potential students would become aware of the programs and services available to them. And, finally, greater awareness would encourage more public involvement and public support in addressing illiteracy. The campaign should be provincially coordinated but also keyed to and accessible by local communities.

A public awareness campaign should use the appropriate media, with an emphasis on television and radio advertising as opposed to the use of newspapers and magazines. The message should focus on the personal satisfaction of learning and learning as a lifelong activity. Also, the cost of illiteracy to society could be addressed, as well as the benefits of literacy — to individuals, businesses and society as a whole.

Funding support for program development must be carefully synchronized with public awareness efforts to ensure that demand does not outstrip the supply of programs available.

PREVENTION

Recommendation 2

That northern Alberta school boards and Alberta Education take the responsibility and subsequent action to reduce the incidence of students leaving the school system without sufficient literacy skills.

The Northern Alberta Development Council encourages an emphasis upon the development of fundamental literacy skills. Parents, students and the educational community should continue to work toward ensuring that basic skills are gained within the school system.

Early assessment and diagnostic tests to identify learning styles and disabilities are important first steps. Support programs which help to keep students in the school system, such as peer support programs, student/adult tutoring programs, work experience programs and career and guidance counselling, are encouraged. Students, parents and the education community must continue to recognize the long-term costs of illiteracy to society.

PROGRAM FUNDING

Recommendation 3

That the Alberta government establish a one-window approach to literacy programs and services and that one single department be designated to serve in that role.

There are a number of government agencies, both federal and provincial, that are involved in funding literacy programs. Organizations and institutions that offer literacy training are confused over who to approach for funding and how to access each program. One single department would serve to simplify the process and coordinate the various sources and, as well, would reduce duplications and inconsistencies.

Recommendation 4

That Alberta Advanced Education increase the level of funding for volunteer tutor projects.

Volunteer tutor projects provide a community-based approach to addressing local literacy needs on a flexible basis. They are shown to be very cost-effective. Community Programs Branch of Advanced Education funds volunteer tutor projects at a basic rate of $11,000 to $16,000 per year. Because this amount does not cover costs, project coordinators direct much time and energy toward fund raising activities and searching for additional funding sources.

Recommendation 5

That Alberta Advanced Education provide funding based on the actual needs of individual volunteer tutor projects as per budget requirements which take into account the activities of each project.

At present, funding does not take the actual volunteer tutor project costs into account. Budgeted expenses of coordination and administration, training, travel and number of students, should be covered. The additional expenses northern volunteer tutor projects incur due to larger geographic regions and increased travel costs would be reflected in the budget.

Recommendation 6

That the Alberta government provide institutions with sufficient long-term core funding for literacy programming.

Much of the funding for literacy programs is *ad hoc*, which impairs planning in the long term and disrupts program delivery in the short term. A permanent source of funds would allow for more instructor continuity and overall program stability.

LEARNER SUPPORT

Recommendation 7

That literacy providers ensure a range of support systems are in place to assist adult learners to deal with and overcome the barriers they face.

Literacy learners face a number of barriers which preclude full access to and full participation in adult literacy programs. Before adult students can focus on learning, concerns over money, child care and family must be dealt with. The learner's previous educational experience may not have been positive; this must be recognized and addressed. Student orientation to the classroom and assessing the readiness of the student can help the student prepare for returning to the educational system. Personal, financial and career counselling should be available to students both before and during the program which may be accessible through existing counselling services.

ILLITERACY IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES

Recommendation 8

That the relevant departments in the provincial and federal governments jointly convene a task force together with native organizations such as zone and regional councils, band and settlement councils to examine northern literacy needs.

The Northern Alberta Development Council recognizes that illiteracy is a serious problem in native communities. Statistical trends suggest that the illiteracy rates are higher and perceptions of people in the field support this. Some native communities are with no literacy programs at all and others are without funding to mount their own initiatives. A task force should identify the scope of the problem, the needs at the community level, and also address how program funding and jurisdictional gaps, particularly on reserves, could be met.

OTHER

Recommendation 9

That literacy providers be encouraged to mount innovative and pilot programming to determine the feasibility of areas such as:

- **Workplace literacy**
- **Computer managed learning**
- **Distance education**

The classroom and tutoring approaches to literacy programs appear to be effective. However, the profiles of the literacy learner versus the "statistically illiterate" individual are very different, which suggests that there are many people who could benefit from literacy training but who are not taking advantage of what is available. Workplace literacy may be able to play a role in addressing the needs of illiterate individuals who are employed. It would also benefit the whole literacy area by involving industry and business. Computer managed learning is a newer development that may have some merit in literacy training. Distance education is also becoming feasible with advances in teleconferencing capabilities, combined with ACCESS programming. These new approaches may prove effective and cost-effective and may also attract a more diverse range of individuals requiring literacy skills. Funding for innovative pilot projects is, in general, accessible.